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## *Cleopatra* (1963)

*Cleopatra* was first conceived in emergency, shot in hysteria, and wound up in blind panic, but any effort to saddle blame on Miss [Elizabeth] Taylor for the cost is wrong. . . . Miss Taylor may have had problems of illness and emotional problems, but she didn't cost Twentieth [Century-Fox] any \$35 million!

—FILMMAKER JOSEPH L. MANKIEWICZ, 1962

Few motion pictures made during the entire twentieth century received as much worldwide publicity as did *Cleopatra*. During its prolonged production (1959–1963) this overbloated biblical epic came under tremendous scrutiny. The press provided daily details of the film's latest extravagant production expenditures and titillating tidbits about the real-life adulterous romance between the picture's amorous costars, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. By the time this colossally expensive feature reached theaters in mid-1963, it had racked up a staggering \$42 million cost—\$259.8 million in 2004 dollars. Thus it became one of the most expensive cinema excursions of all time, if not *the* most expensive. Compounding the folly, much of the money lavished recklessly on the picture never translated into anything seen on the screen.

In retrospect, one has to be awed by the astounding degree of chaotic mismanagement, clashing egos, and incredibly self-indulgent behavior that occurred on *Cleopatra*. From start to finish, *Cleopatra* was a stupefying example of how, in the era of the rotting Hollywood studio system, a film could run so out of control because there was no longer an efficient studio hierarchy and machinery to guide the unwieldy production.

The fantastic account of *Cleopatra* reveals that no one at the once illustrious Twentieth Century-Fox studio could, or would, bring the elaborate production under fiscal—let alone artistic—control. Once the dubious screen spectacular was launched into production, the momentum built at an insane rate. While it was on its thorny path to completion, none of the changing Fox regimes was strong enough or sufficiently objective to put a stop to this project so full of staggering self-indulgence and foolhardy business decisions. As a result Twentieth Century-Fox nearly fell into total financial collapse, careers were made and lost, and, most notably, Hollywood was never the same again.



In the 1950s the once lucrative U.S. film industry was in a bad state, buckling under three devastating blows to its fiscal well-being. First, there was the 1948 antitrust consent decree in which the U.S. government required the major movie studios to divest themselves of their lucrative theater exhibition divisions. Second, the simultaneous spread of commercial television kept a growing number of filmgoers at home watching free entertainment on the small screen. Third, Tinseltown hysteria was spawned by the House Un-American Activities Committee's investigation of the supposed Communist "infiltration" of the film business. (This witch hunt led the frightened studios and TV networks to blacklist anyone suspected of a Red taint and created a damaging talent drain.)

In 1950, as these factors were making themselves felt in Hollywood, the studios released 622 pictures in the United States to 19,306 theaters. The average weekly cinema attendance in America was 60 million, with the average admission price being 53 cents. By 1958 the number of Hollywood releases for the year had dropped to 507, and there were only 16,000 theaters. Average weekly cinema attendance in the United States had sunk to 40 million, and the average ticket price had dipped by two cents (largely due to the increase in the number of drive-in theaters, which

charged lower admission than traditional cinemas). These developments accounted for the \$384 million falloff in annual box-office receipts between 1950 and 1958.

In 1950 Paramount's *Samson and Delilah* (which had debuted in late 1949) was the big box-office winner, with MGM having three entries in the top five earners, and Twentieth Century-Fox having one (the fourth-place *Cheaper by the Dozen*). Seven years later, Fox was represented by a single superlucrative entry (the second-place earner, *Peyton Place*).

A great deal had happened at the Fox lot since it was incorporated in 1915 by movie pioneer William Fox. The founder had been ousted in 1930. In 1935 the studio merged with the relatively new Twentieth Century Pictures and became Twentieth Century-Fox. Darryl F. Zanuck was placed in charge of the new studio's production. In 1942 film exhibitor executive Spyros P. Skouras, who had participated in the 1935 Fox Films restructuring, was appointed president of the studio. During these decades the autocratic Zanuck remained fully in charge of the company's production output (with the exception of his World War II duty supervising a documentary film unit).

In 1953, due to the push of the studio's longtime president, Spyros Skouras, Twentieth Century-Fox released *The Robe*, which introduced CinemaScope, its patented wide-screen process. The biblical spectacle, which lured viewers away from their TVs and back into movie theaters, was an enormous hit. Made for about \$5 million, it grossed more than \$17.5 million in North American film rentals to theaters (\$124.1 million in 2004 dollars). CinemaScope was anointed Hollywood's savior in its war against the rival television industry. To profitable results, Fox licensed use of its wide-screen anamorphic lens to other Tinseltown studios.

Three years later, even as the novelty of CinemaScope was wearing thin, Fox maintained an average annual profit of \$6 to \$7 million. Early in 1956 a restless Zanuck, one of the studio's founders and its longtime production chief, resigned from Fox to undertake independent film production abroad and to satisfy his sexual lust with a series of shapely protégées. His replacement as Fox's production chief was the experienced but low-key film producer Buddy Adler. Adler brought in Jerry Wald, a veteran production executive/screenwriter. (Wald was one of a team of independent producers now attached to the studio to help churn out product that would offset the company's large plant overhead.) Among

the new regime's offerings were such box-office winners as *The King and I* (1956—begun during Zanuck's reign), *Anastasia* (1956), *Love Me Tender* (1956), *Island in the Sun* (1957—one of Zanuck's independent projects), *Peyton Place* (1957), and *South Pacific* (1958). (On the flip side were such costly financial misfires as 1957's *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Sun Also Rises*, and 1958's *The Barbarian and the Geisha* and *The Roots of Heaven*.)

As 1958 wound down, Fox's front-office executives looked forward to the release of Ingrid Bergman's *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*. On the slate for 1959 distribution were a few prestige productions (i.e., *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Compulsion*). Jerry Wald had in preparation *The Best of Everything*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Beloved Infidel*, and *Hound-Dog Man*. Also set for distribution were the Clifton Webb domestic comedies *The Remarkable Mr. Pennypacker* and *Holiday for Lovers*, a Jules Verne adventure yarn (*Journey to the Center of the Earth*), and *Return of the Fly* (a modest sequel to an earlier studio hit). But the remainder of Fox's 34 pictures scheduled for 1959 debuts was slim pickings. It left a nervous Spyros Skouras vulnerable to increasingly dissatisfied stockholders and Wall Street investment firms, who were convinced he and his underlings were losing touch with public taste.



In 1958 the erudite Walter Wanger was 64 years old and suffered from a heart problem. The longtime film executive had served as chief of production at Paramount in the late 1920s and early 1930s, followed by similar stints at both Columbia Pictures and MGM. Thereafter he turned to independent production. His screen successes in the 1940s (including 1945's *Salome, Where She Danced*) were offset by his tremendously expensive *Joan of Arc* (1948). This failed costume drama forced Wanger into near bankruptcy.

Back in 1940 the well-bred Walter had married his second wife, screen beauty Joan Bennett. The couple had two daughters. In 1952 the dapper Wanger was sent to prison briefly for having shot and wounded talent agent Jennings Lang the previous year. Walter had fired on Jennings because of the latter's suspected affair with Bennett. Once paroled, Walter found it difficult to reestablish himself in Hollywood. However,

he made a major career comeback with the late 1958 United Artists release *I Want to Live!* It won six Oscar nominations and earned its star, Susan Hayward, a Best Actress Academy Award.

In September 1958, a few months before *I Want to Live!* opened, Wanger visited Spyros Skouras at Twentieth Century-Fox. Skouras was deeply troubled over the company's dim fiscal prospects: Fox would make a small profit in 1959, suffer a minor loss in 1960, and then dive into a major economic tailspin in 1961 and 1962, with losses of \$22.5 million and \$39.8 million, respectively. With this adverse economic situation under way, a frantic Skouras was looking for a tremendous picture that could restore the company's economic luster as had *The Robe* a few years prior. He believed that the studio could still cash in on the biblical-picture craze, a rejuvenated movie genre bolstered first by *The Robe* and then by Paramount's huge commercial success with *The Ten Commandments* (1956). Such box-office winners had convinced MGM to undertake a costly remake of its 1925 box-office winner *Ben-Hur*. (The 1959 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer release, made for an estimated \$15 million, would gross more than \$70 million.) United Artists had *Solomon and Sheba* in production. (That 1959 extravaganza would soar to a near \$5 million budget, due, in part, to the fact that its leading man, Tyrone Power, died midway through the shoot. His scenes had to be reshot with a replacement, Yul Brynner.) In this period Universal had green-lighted *Spartacus*, a saga of a slave revolt in ancient Rome, for 1960. (Made at a cost of \$12 million, this Kirk Douglas vehicle brought in \$14 million at the domestic box office.)



When Spyros Skouras met with Walter Wanger (who had an independent producer's arrangement with Fox), the studio leader planned to assign Wanger to oversee a project he hoped would turn the lot's financial tide. After examining the studio's inventory of owned film properties, Spyros had settled on redoing *Cleopatra*. That 1917 silent feature had been enormously profitable for the studio. It was Skouras's ill-conceived notion that the creaky old vehicle could be "inexpensively" updated and mounted as an upcoming Fox CinemaScope release. At the time, Buddy Adler, Fox's production head, was unexcited by Skouras's idea. However,

Adler was too preoccupied with running the studio's operations. He was also suffering from the early stages of the cancer that would kill him in July 1960 at age 51. As a result, in the fall of 1958 Adler reluctantly went along with making Skouras's historical epic.

When Skouras conferred with Wanger, he was well aware that Walter already had a strong interest in antiquity's famous siren. Months after the 1957 publication of Charles Marie Franzero's *The Life and Times of Cleopatra*, Wanger had taken a \$15,000 screen option on the book. His immediate notion was that MGM's Elizabeth Taylor would be ideal to play Egypt's wily queen, who ruled from 51 B.C. to 30 B.C. (In her fight with her brother over who would control Egypt's throne, the young Cleopatra sought and then seduced Julius Caesar, the great general/leader of the Roman Empire, after his army defeated the Egyptians. Thereafter, Caesar placed her in power and she had a son by him. Later, Caesar was killed by his opponents in Rome. To further support her claim on the Egyptian throne, Cleopatra made a romantic alliance with Mark Antony. The latter was in a fight of his own with Octavian Caesar, who was to become Augustus Caesar, the first emperor of Rome. After Antony's defeat and death, Cleopatra reputedly committed suicide rather than surrender to Octavian's invading Roman forces.) Wanger approached Taylor's husband, stage and film producer Mike Todd, to discuss the casting. However, the gruff Todd, who micromanaged his wife's career, vetoed the idea. Months later (in March 1958) Todd died in a plane crash, and Wanger's *Cleopatra* venture stalled. Nevertheless, Walter still hoped to somehow convince Elizabeth to portray the Egyptian monarch.

From the start of negotiations, Skouras and Wanger were an ill-matched team. The crude, tyrannical 65-year-old Greek-born film executive, a father of four children, was a self-made man who had never mastered the proper use (or pronunciation) of English. A shrewd businessman, he understood how to sell movies to exhibitors and to the public. However, he had little appreciation of—let alone experience with—the moviemaking process or screen aesthetics. In contrast, the Dartmouth College-educated Wanger knew all facets of picturemaking and had substantial film credits to his name.

Thus, the battle of wills began. The Fox studio head envisioned *Cleopatra* as a \$1 million production to be shot within a month on the company's backlot. As a further cost-saver, Skouras planned to use talent

already under contract to Fox. One possibility for the title role was Joanne Woodward, the Georgia-born actress who had won an Academy Award for *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957). An alternative was the comely Joan Collins. (The British-born performer had already played an ancient Egyptian princess in Warner Bros.' 1955 spectacle *Land of the Pharaohs*.)

Countering Skouras's concept, Wanger told Skouras that he wanted to shoot the film in Italy to give the project scope and that he hoped to use Taylor in the crucial lead. He theorized that if Elizabeth was cast in a well-mounted production (that is, a blockbuster), it could emerge as an important feature that would garner tremendous reviews and huge box-office returns. The crafty Spyros did not say definitely "no" to the use of Taylor. Skouras wanted to get Wanger on board before imposing his strong will on the film. The Fox decision maker believed that he would have minimal difficulty riding roughshod over the professionally vulnerable Wanger once the gentlemanly producer had committed to the venture.

For his part, Wanger, who was close to retirement age, envisioned making one final important picture to cap his long filmmaking career. This pending Fox assignment could be the memorable professional finale Walter craved to leave the industry on a high note. With this goal his prime motivation, Walter chose to overlook his previous thorny experiences navigating daily through irksome studio politics. He dismissed the downside of having to work again within the committee system of an old-fashioned, gargantuan studio operation run by crass, self-serving, often badly informed individuals.

Wanger and Skouras each left their meeting convinced he had come out the victor. An immediate wake-up call for Walter should have been his conversation—directly after his Skouras confab—with Joseph Moskowitz, Fox's executive vice president. As they departed the conference, Spyros's dedicated associate, a man of no warmth, told Walter, "Who needs a Liz Taylor? Any hundred-dollar-a-week girl can play Cleopatra."



By November 1958, having signed his *Cleopatra* agreement with Fox, which would pay him \$2,000 a week plus 15% of the picture's gross, Wanger took it upon himself to present Elizabeth Taylor with a copy of

*The Life and Times of Cleopatra* (upsetting the Fox hierarchy). He hoped this gesture would pique her interest in the pending Fox project.

At the time, the 26-year-old beauty was at a career high. She was receiving great praise for the just-released *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, made for MGM, her longtime home studio. (Taylor would be Oscar-nominated for her performance in this Tennessee Williams drama, which further enhanced her industry standing.) On a personal level, however, her popularity with the public was in flux. Months before, the grieving widow of Mike Todd had proved she was a show business trouser by returning to the sound stage so soon after his death to complete *Cat*. This endeared Elizabeth to her legion of fans. However, more recently, spicy rumors had been circulating about the three-times married Taylor (the mother of three) and the increased quality time she was spending with the popular vocalist Eddie Fisher (the protégé of the late Todd). The crooner was then married to the adored movie star Debbie Reynolds, with whom he had two children.

By early 1959 the hearsay about “man-hungry” Taylor and sweet-faced Fisher being in love had proved to be a scandalous reality. Reynolds and Fisher underwent a nasty divorce. After converting to Judaism, Elizabeth wed Eddie in May 1959. Thereafter, Fisher put his singing career on the back burner in order to cater to his high-maintenance spouse’s every whim. He became her on-set companion during the London filming of *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz.

Meanwhile at Fox, pre-production for *Cleopatra* was in high gear. Without having a proper shooting script ready, an impatient Skouras, with Buddy Adler’s compliance, imprudently ordered designer John DeCuir (a Twentieth Century-Fox contract art director) and his staff to start preparing models and sketches for the massive outdoor sets to be constructed on the studio’s backlot. While this was in progress, the studio belatedly assigned a succession of scribes to convert the creaky 1917 *Cleopatra* screenplay into a workable vehicle. Eventually, Wanger persuaded Skouras to use the Charles Marie Franzero book as a basis for the film (along with the works of such ancient historians as Plutarch and Appianus).

As to casting the pivotal role, Spyros and his team were having problems. They had thought Suzy Parker, the former model turned Fox actress, might suffice in the lead part, but she was pregnant. Joanne Wood-



ward made it clear she was not interested in the assignment. British-born Joan Collins was actually screen-tested. While she gave an adequate performance, the higher-ups eventually decided that they wanted someone more special. Other candidates from within and without Fox—including Susan Hayward, Marilyn Monroe, Kim Novak, and Jennifer Jones—all came under consideration to play the Egyptian queen.

By the late summer of 1959, Wanger was more determined than ever to have the luscious Taylor portray the Egyptian royal figure—at whatever cost. He dismissed Skouras's concerns that Elizabeth had a track record of being troublesome and was prone to health problems on film shoots. As to her current ill favor with the public (for having “stolen” Eddie Fisher from Debbie Reynolds), Walter believed that would evaporate eventually and/or enhance her backstory for playing the seductive queen. Meanwhile, Wanger's wish list for the film's coleads included Sir Laurence Olivier as Julius Caesar and Richard Burton as Mark Antony. (The studio preferred Cary Grant and Burt Lancaster in these roles, respectively.)

On September 1, 1959, the unrelenting Wanger telephoned Taylor in London—where she was completing *Suddenly, Last Summer*—to ask her yet again to be his Cleopatra. By now, the five-feet-four-inch star was amused by Walter's notion but did not think it would ever come to be. In fact, when she discussed the pipe dream casting with Fisher, Eddie supposedly suggested, “You ought to do it for a million dollars.”

Since Elizabeth was then earning a “paltry” \$125,000 per picture under her MGM pact, which had one picture to go, she was intrigued by her husband's ambitious salary suggestion. (For the hedonistic Taylor, receiving such a remarkable movie fee would foster her lush lifestyle. More important, it would validate her sense of self-worth, placing her at the top of her industry and proving that she was indeed loved and wanted.)

When Taylor laughingly told Wanger her exorbitant contractual demands (which now included receiving 10% of the box-office gross), he did not say no. After agreeing that the current script draft that had been sent to her needed work, he told her he would get back to her on the deal. At this juncture the cancer-ridden Buddy Adler was on the decline at Fox, and Spyros Skouras had become the point man on all decisions regarding the screen venture. Fearful of being ousted from his lucrative post by disgruntled stockholders, the besieged Skouras had latched onto

*Cleopatra* as his ticket to professional salvation. Getting this picture through the production process had become his Holy Grail, as it was already for Wanger.

By this time bulldozers were destroying standing sets on the Fox backlot to make room for the planned elaborate set pieces for *Cleopatra*. Already Skouras et al. had agreed with utilizing a major star in their “big” picture—a vehicle that they estimated might rise in its budget to \$2 million. They had narrowed their choices for a leading lady to Susan Hayward, Elizabeth Taylor, and Audrey Hepburn (who wanted to do the picture but had prior filming commitments). Despite Wanger’s lengthy past professional association with Hayward, he much preferred Taylor for the part. However, her astronomical salary demands astounded the Fox hierarchy. To that date only William Holden and one or two others had ever been paid \$1 million for a single picture. Wanger was now ordered to bargain Taylor’s price down to \$600,000. While he negotiated with Taylor (and her agent and lawyer), the studio considered using Italy’s Sophia Loren or Gina Lollobrigida for *Cleopatra*.

In the seesawing negotiations, Taylor finally agreed to do *Cleopatra* for a fee of \$750,000; \$4,500 in weekly living expenses for her, Fisher, and their entourage; 10% of the box-office gross; and \$50,000 a week if the picture went over its planned sixteen-week schedule. She demanded directorial approval and that the film be shot abroad (for tax purposes). Other requirements and perks stipulated by Taylor included deluxe living accommodations during the shoot and a \$150,000 salary for Eddie Fisher to handle unspecified duties as her assistant. Elizabeth also insisted that the epic be lensed in the Todd-AO wide-screen process. (This had an adverse effect on the studio, as it required Fox to make hefty licensing payments to the company founded by Elizabeth’s late husband, Mike Todd. Moreover, using this filming process necessitated extra-careful attention to the lighting of the sound-stage sets, which was both time-consuming and expensive.)

What made Elizabeth’s extraordinary deal “acceptable” to the Fox team was that her salary would be paid in yearly installments into a trust fund for her children. This deferred payment made Taylor’s unprecedented salary demands viable to Skouras, who had touted *Cleopatra* so frequently to staffers and to stockholders that he dared not turn back.

In mid-1959 Taylor signed an agreement (which led to a later final contract) to headline *Cleopatra*. Because Elizabeth was already locked

into making one more MGM picture (1960's *Butterfield 8*), *Cleopatra's* start was delayed to the fall of 1960. To comply with Taylor's requirement that filming be done abroad, set building on *Cleopatra* at Fox was halted. Several executives, including Wanger (whom the studio was already trying to freeze out from his position of authority), visited Italy to scout locations. Shooting in that country was rejected because the upcoming 1960 Olympics in Rome would create difficulties in obtaining needed housing, transportation, and building contractors and crews for *Cleopatra*. Fox accountants convinced the studio that England was a better choice. By taking advantage of that country's Eady Plan, which required using several British actors/technicians in the project, Fox would receive tax breaks and subsidies from the U.K. government, as well as have access to some of its frozen funds in England.

These financial inducements to film in England clouded the studio's judgment. It caused them to dismiss the concerns of Wanger and others that a British shoot was wrong on several counts: (1) the countryside hardly resembled the terrain of Italy or Egypt, where the narrative takes place, (2) existing British studio facilities were either already booked or too small for the increasingly elaborate *Cleopatra* project, and (3) England's inclement climate (much fog, rain, and cold temperatures) was not conducive to shooting many scenes outdoors. Skouras and his squad failed to heed the warnings. Contracts were signed to film at the Pinewood Studios some miles north of London.

While a succession of increasingly expensive writers were attached to (re)revamp the still unsatisfactory *Cleopatra* script, Fox finalized its choice of director. Wanger, who had produced Alfred Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), wanted to hire the famed British helmer. Hitchcock declined the offer. Skouras "suggested" that 62-year-old Rouben Mamoulian, an old friend, be used. Although Wanger had worked with Mamoulian on 1933's highly lauded *Queen Christina* with Greta Garbo, the veteran stage and film director was a strange choice to guide the mammoth *Cleopatra*. Most recently Mamoulian had been fired from the screen musical *Porgy and Bess* (1959). His few recent film credits were largely musicals (including 1957's *Silk Stockings* and 1948's *Summer Holiday*). Nevertheless, Rouben came aboard the picture.

At this juncture good business sense no longer existed where *Cleopatra* was concerned. In fact, Skouras and his subordinates were so convinced that *Cleopatra* would be their salvation that they were determined

not to be deterred by reality. This mentality meant that the hierarchy rarely, if ever, read the many production reports (prepared by costly outside professionals) that alerted the studio to budget costs, options, and dangers on the ever-expanding venture.



By mid-May 1960 an already frustrated Walter Wanger wrote in his *Cleopatra* production diary, “This is an absolute disaster. . . . Hollywood has given us an August 15 starting date, but we don’t have enough studio space, don’t have a full cast, don’t have a script, and don’t have a crew of laborers.” Fox had escalated the film’s budget to an announced \$4.2 million. (The ever-fluctuating “official” budget was part of the embattled Skouras’s accounting game with stockholders to hide the already embarrassingly high actual costs on the project.) This sum was an unrealistic figure, given that \$2 million had already been spent on the project, with few tangible results. (Soon Fox would add to the budget by paying \$275,000 to Italian producer Lionello Santi to prevent his already completed *Cleopatra* from being shown in the American marketplace. This was typical of the monetary outlays the studio was expending on its extravaganza.)

Greatly concerned about the spiraling situation, Wanger and Mamoulian visited Darryl F. Zanuck in Paris. They hoped to enlist the counsel of the studio’s former production chief (and still one of Fox’s largest shareholders). However, Zanuck was too preoccupied with preparing his dream movie project—1962’s *The Longest Day*—and catering to his latest mistress. He rejected his visitors’ plea for help.

In July 1960 Buddy Adler succumbed to cancer. He was replaced (temporarily) as chief of studio production by Bob Goldstein, whose lack of experience for the demanding post quickly earned him Wanger’s mistrust. By this point *Cleopatra*’s official budget had risen to \$6 million (nearly \$5 million more than the cost of a typical movie production in 1960). Despite the studio’s having upped the sum to make the picture, it was an impracticable figure, given the obstacles of shooting in England on a five-day workweek (in contrast to the six-day workweek allowed in Italy) and the lack of a finished script, sets, or costumes—all of which were now being addressed in helter-skelter fashion at overtime costs. Meanwhile, as an “economy” move and to satisfy the demands of the Eady Plan, British-born Peter Finch (who had worked with Taylor in 1954’s *Elephant Walk*)

and Northern Ireland-born Stephen Boyd (the villain of 1959's *Ben-Hur*) were cast, respectively, as Julius Caesar and Mark Antony.

By August 31, 1960, the Elizabeth Taylor–Eddie Fisher contingent had arrived in England, with the famed couple settling into plush penthouse suites at London's elite Dorchester Hotel. In the meantime, on more than eight acres at the Pinewood Studios, landmark structures of ancient Alexandria and Rome were being constructed at excessive cost and effort. (Fox decision makers would quickly discover that the expansive sets were vulnerable to quick deterioration in British weather, requiring expensive and constant refurbishing.)

Wanger continued to kowtow to the control of the highly frazzled Skouras. In his panic to retain his studio power, the latter was becoming more self-serving and duplicitous. Spyros constantly countermanded Walter's requests and demands and even shut him out of the decision-making process. Concerned about his own fragile health, Walter lacked either the stamina or the requisite degree of down-and-dirty craftiness to combat the Fox home team. More and more he became a passive player in the snowballing chaos. Before long he would become a figurehead whom Skouras and his lieutenants (especially Sid Rogell and Bob Goldstein) sabotaged and/or ignored at every possible turn.



On September 28, 1960, filming on *Cleopatra* began at the Pinewood Studios. The imperious Taylor had demanded that her longtime MGM hairstylist, Sydney Guilaroff, dress her hair and wigs on *Cleopatra*. This went against U.K. labor union laws, causing the British hairdressers to stop working—twice—on the first day of the shoot and then go out on strike. With the American film squad pitted against their English brethren, it seemed *Cleopatra* might permanently grind to a halt. However, it was finally resolved that Guilaroff could style Taylor's hair at her hotel digs but not on the film set. Since the regal Elizabeth had largely won her way in this matter, she confidently turned her attention to other caprices (including a fling with costar Peter Finch).

Throughout her life Taylor had been prone to a rash of actual and psychosomatic attention-grabbing ailments and was a magnet for accidents to befall her. Whether real, imagined, or just bad luck, her array of physical disabilities over the years had earned her a reputation for being

a potential major liability on a movie set. (Her shaky health was certainly not helped by her long-standing regimen of drugs, cigarettes, alcohol, and binges of gluttonous overeating followed by unhealthy bouts of severe dieting.) As a precaution, Fox paid hefty insurance premiums to Lloyds of London to protect their investment in Taylor and their costly film. (Elizabeth's presence on the set was so central to the *Cleopatra* script that her being sidelined for even a day could put the production schedule and the spiraling budget into real jeopardy.)

Nearly from the start of filming, Elizabeth was suffering from a cold, which soon developed into a viral infection complicated by an infected impacted tooth. This caused chaos for Mamoulian, who was already overwhelmed by the size of the production and the lack of a completed script, sets, or costumes. The director attempted to shoot around Taylor, but little could be accomplished without her participation. The star's incapacitation continued. (Her condition was aggravated when Eddie Fisher temporarily left her to go to the United States on business and she flew into an emotional tailspin.) As the production fell seriously behind schedule and costs continued to skyrocket, a highly nervous Lloyds of London recommended that Fox shut down production, which would halt much of the daily financial outlay. The insurance firm offered a \$1.74 million insurance settlement and suggested the studio restart filming after Taylor had recovered. A panicked Skouras vetoed this practical notion, insistent that his troubled shoot must move ever forward. He knew that if he closed down *Cleopatra* he would have no leverage to keep angry Fox stockholders from demanding his immediate removal.

Over subsequent months the star's health reached a new low when she contracted meningitis. After a week's hospital stay, she and Fisher returned to California so she could recuperate fully. Meanwhile, a stymied Mamoulian, way over his head in this exasperating state of affairs, shot thousands of feet of film (mostly endless costume tests). Exploding under the pressure of this growing disaster, Rouben threatened to quit the troubled project. He assumed that Taylor would demand he be retained on the production and that somehow he could finally regain control of the shoot. However, unbeknownst to Mamoulian, by this point Elizabeth had changed her allegiance. She quietly advised Fox executives that she would accept George Stevens or Joseph L. Mankiewicz—each of whom had directed her previously with positive results—as a replacement for the floundering Rouben.

In mounting desperation, Skouras and his minions contacted Mankiewicz, who reluctantly accepted the offer to take over *Cleopatra* once the studio agreed to pay \$3 million (half to him, half to his NBC network partner) to purchase his production company, and to provide him with a \$150,000 salary, plus other fees. Once Mamoulion officially quit *Cleopatra* as of January 19, 1961, Mankiewicz informed Twentieth Century-Fox (to which he had once been under long-term contract) that he must rewrite (with some outside help) the inferior existing script. Since the ten minutes of existing completed footage shot to date was not usable, in Mankiewicz's estimation, he planned to scrap it and start over. (The new director also demanded that the expensive costumes be tossed aside and new ones created for Taylor by Irene Sharaff and for the men by Vittorio Nino Novarese.) Caught in a bind, Skouras gave his consent. This meant that the production had to shut down for a further two months, which cost Fox \$45,000 per day in overhead! By now, more than \$7 million had been expended on *Cleopatra*, with nothing viable to show for the humongous effort.



While Mankiewicz and others were struggling to revamp the script for the second start to filming *Cleopatra* in England, the fragile Taylor again became ill. On March 4, 1961, she was rushed to a London hospital, where she was diagnosed with a virulent form of pneumonia. An emergency tracheotomy saved her from death. Recovering from the ordeal, she observed, "I felt I touched God."

Her touch-and-go situation (during which she "died" four times) made her the center of worldwide media attention. Suddenly, Taylor, not so long ago branded a husband stealer, was back in the public's favor. She and Fisher again flew back to California so she could recover in a warm climate. On April 18, 1962, a sympathy vote earned her a Best Actress Oscar for *Butterfield 8*. Skouras and Fox were jubilant that Elizabeth's brush with death had resulted in such favorable publicity.

While a bored Taylor dallied out of media range with Max Lerner, her Los Angeles-based columnist lover, Fox negotiated a settlement with Lloyds of London over the protracted shutdown of *Cleopatra*. (The insurance firm eventually paid Fox more than \$2 million, but this was less than a third of what the studio had expended to that date on the floundering

epic.) Lloyds advocated that ailment-prone Taylor be replaced by Kim Novak, Shirley MacLaine, or even the Italian sex siren Rossana Podestà (who had starred in 1956's *Helen of Troy*). For once in agreement, Skouras and Wanger rejected these untenable choices. (Said Walter, "No Liz, no Cleo!") They insisted that Elizabeth be kept on the troubled project. Meanwhile, production costs kept mounting at a tremendous rate, further riling already agitated Fox shareholders.



When *Cleopatra* filming resumed once more (actually, began anew) in the late summer of 1961, much had changed. Not only was director/scenarist Joseph L. Mankiewicz now in charge, but cinematographer Leon Shamroy had replaced Jack Hilyard. Production had been relocated to the sprawling Cinecittà studio in a suburb of Rome. There for a third (!) time the complicated and expansive sixty sets for *Cleopatra* were constructed from scratch. Much of the costuming from the English filming had been abandoned, and a new wardrobe had to be substituted, including 26,000 outfits for supporting players and extras. Because of Taylor's ever-fluctuating weight, her nearly sixty costumes—including a \$6,500 formfitting gold dress—had to be constantly revamped. In the rush to find a location for re-creating the harbor of Alexandria, the studio production scouts in Italy hastily chose a site near Anzio, unaware that (1) there was a massive sandbar near where Caesar's ship was to dock, (2) the adjacent waters still contained live mines set in place during World War II, and (3) NATO maintained a firing range in the vicinity, which frequently ruined the sound recording of photographed scenes.

By now Peter Finch and Stephen Boyd had been paid off and had left the stalled film project. They were replaced, at great expense, by Rex Harrison (at \$10,000 a week, plus expenses and perks that soon added up to well more than \$200,000 during the course of his participation) and Richard Burton. The latter, a 36-year-old Welshman who had gained initial show business fame on the British stage, had been under a Twentieth Century-Fox contract in the 1950s (during which time he costarred in, among other films, *The Robe*). At the time Mankiewicz requested Burton to play Taylor's on-screen lover, Richard was headlining a Broadway musical (*Camelot*). That show's producers insisted upon a hefty \$50,000 to



release Richard from the final months of his stage contract. Thereafter, Burton rushed to Rome, where he sat around largely unused for several months. By the time Mankiewicz was ready to shoot Richard's scenes, the actor was on overtime pay. Before he finished with *Cleopatra*, Burton's original \$250,000 salary had mushroomed to \$750,000. (Another cast member hired away from *Camelot* was Roddy McDowall, the former child actor and a longtime friend of Taylor's. The Britisher had already played the role of Octavian on stage in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and was hired to perform that part again in the screen epic.)



Mankiewicz, a bright and articulate industry veteran who had won Academy Awards for directing/scripting *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949) and *All About Eve* (1950), had previously helmed a version of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1953). That MGM costume drama was a carefully budgeted, relatively modest production, made on the studio's backlot under controlled conditions. With *Cleopatra* Mankiewicz had bitten off more than he could comfortably chew. Because of the studio's dictates to get filming in Rome under way at once, he had no time to leisurely redraft the script. As a result he wrote scenes at night while shooting other sequences during the day. Not only did this put tremendous pressure on him, but it also prevented the company from efficiently filming scenes in the established Hollywood manner: that is, out of script sequence to make the most cost-effective use of cast, sets, and technicians.

Adding to the filmmaker's woes, by now Walter Wanger had succumbed to the daily grind of the overwhelming project and the unrelenting studio politics. Yielding to the morass, he retreated from most of his duties. Many of his producer's responsibilities fell onto Mankiewicz. To survive the mushrooming ordeal, the director embarked on a nonstop regimen that allowed for little sleep (he bolstered himself with daily injections to stimulate his adrenaline). The cumulative results of this punishing schedule left him too often unable to deal effectively with his cast, let alone with revamping the script, making on-set technical decisions, or handling the ever-present visiting contingent of worried Fox executives.

By the time the picture resumed filming in late September 1961, the long-hoped-for blockbuster had zoomed well past its latest revised budget

of \$17 million. To ensure that Elizabeth came to Rome, Fox had acceded to her latest demands. These included such perks as Fox subsidizing accommodations for her expanding entourage and paying her Beverly Hills personal physician \$25,000 to be on hand during the envisioned seven-week shoot in Rome just in case she needed medical attention. Besides providing Elizabeth and Fisher with a swanky large villa on the fashionable Via Appia Antica, Fox allocated a special building at Cinecittà as Taylor's commodious dressing suite. It provided ample space for Elizabeth and her large support staff of makeup, wardrobe, and stylist artists. There was even a special room designated just for her many on-screen wigs. (When other key cast members learned what special treatment Elizabeth was receiving, they insisted upon their own additional perks.)



As 1961 wound down, the filming of the first half of *Cleopatra's* story line, focusing on Cleopatra's romance with Caesar, went relatively smoothly—at least on screen. It resulted in solid performances, especially by the superb, albeit temperamental, Harrison. For the frantic Fox executives, this completed footage outweighed unpleasant reports of the chaotic muddle in Italy that was causing much of the talent to sit about for weeks or months and be paid for doing nothing. With such rampant confusion on the set, many of the cast and crew began taking extra-long workday lunches as well as disappearing from Rome on weekends for lengthy jaunts elsewhere.

As executives had feared when Rome had first been considered as a location site back in 1958, the Italians took shrewd advantage of their disorganized American employers. Extras would show up at the studio, sign in for pay vouchers, then disappear from the lot to attend to their real daytime jobs, returning in late afternoon in time to be paid by the Fox cashiers. Many supplies—including a vast number of paper cups—were billed and double-billed to the Fox project, or materials ordered and paid for to construct the enormous sets would mysteriously vanish and be resold elsewhere. (Some members of the film's Hollywood contingent, deciding to do as the Romans do when in Rome, ran their own lucrative scams. One executive secretly owned a controlling stake in the catering company supplying the meals for the massive *Cleopatra* cast and crew. This enterprising individual found ways to ensure that the catering firm

was overpaid for services rendered and funneled much of the profits back into his own pockets.)



At the end of January 1962 Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton filmed their first real scenes together. Having spent months on the sidelines collecting an impressive salary and indulging himself in bouts of heavy drinking and womanizing, the married leading man (who had two daughters with his wife, Sybil) arrived on the *Cleopatra* set on January 22 suffering from an extreme hangover. His hands shook and his eyes darted about in nervous confusion. Years before, in the Hollywood of the mid-1950s, Taylor had casually met her costar and had thought him too full of himself. Now she had a magical change of heart. Elizabeth immediately began nurturing the hungover Burton on the Cinecittà sound stages. Soon she found herself awed by Richard's rugged masculinity (which reminded her of Mike Todd). The self-focused Taylor was unmindful that her husband, Eddie Fisher, was a witness to the growing flirtation.

For his part, Richard had long indulged in affairs with his leading ladies but had always tired of them and returned to his faithful wife. This time it was different. He became besotted with Elizabeth's beauty and raw sensuality and was agog by his sudden realization that she was "so fucking famous." (Having experienced a tough working-class childhood, Burton had developed a strong appreciation for the finer material things in life. He realized that orbiting in Taylor's galaxy would increase his own fame and, in turn, would make him worthy of higher salaries on future projects. The Welshman would observe later of his *Cleopatra* escapade, both on and off the set, "A man who comes through that ordeal of fire in Rome must emerge a different or a better man." )



Although weighed down by his Herculean multitasking on *Cleopatra*, Mankiewicz quickly understood the depth of the amorous situation on the *Cleopatra* set. He alerted Twentieth Century-Fox, "Liz and Burton are not just playing Antony and Cleopatra." Back in Hollywood, studio executives wondered how the media and the public—in the still relatively unadventurous 1960s—would react when the affair (soon nicknamed

*le scandale* by Richard Burton) became general knowledge. The front office worried that conservative, fickle moviegoers would again turn on Taylor and boycott *Cleopatra*.

The Taylor-Burton romance quickly built momentum and soon left an embarrassed and irate Eddie Fisher and Sybil Burton in its messy wake. The naturally gloomy Richard masked his guilt about committing adultery by drinking even more heavily and swearing to himself and others that he would return to Sybil and their children. (As a distraction from the too-captivating Elizabeth, the Shakespearean actor imported a past fling—a New York showgirl—to Rome to be at his side.) Reacting to the complicated domestic situation she had fostered, Elizabeth either treated her current spouse with cruel indifference or, on occasion, begged his forgiveness. The stress caused Taylor to suffer fresh bouts of physical illness and to attempt suicide on a few occasions, especially whenever either Richard or Eddie insisted they were through with her. Enmeshed in this circuslike atmosphere of ongoing shenanigans, most of the cast and crew—especially key players Taylor and Burton—were too often distracted from focusing on their filmmaking chores. This created production delays and propelled the film’s mounting costs, compounding the difficulty for Mankiewicz in controlling the production. When asked by a coworker how he kept a relative surface calm during these trying times, he replied, “When you’re in a cage with tigers you never let them know you’re afraid of them or they’ll eat you.” As for the supremely egocentric Taylor, who had grown up in the film business and thrived on being the center of attention, the global hullabaloo over *Cleopatra* and the costars’ off-set antics was getting to be too much—even for her. When asked to do a publicity chore that might put a positive spin on the picture, she retorted, “The picture has had too much fucking publicity.”

Contrary to Fox’s original fears, the emerging news of the deliciously scandalous behavior of Elizabeth and Richard amused much of the press (but not Vatican City’s *L’Osservatore della Domenica*, which castigated the indiscreet couple) and endlessly fascinated the public. The cinema pair became the most famous lovebirds of the 20th century. Indulging themselves to the full limit, the excessively pampered duo would take long workday lunches, stay out far too late at night, and disappear for long weekends away from the hysterical paparazzi. In short, filming *Cleopatra* had been reduced to a secondary priority for the hedonistic stars.

(As the Taylor-Burton scandal became the focus of global attention, a miffed Rex Harrison became increasingly demanding of his employers, jealous that his costars' activities had robbed him of the limelight.)

While this astonishing three-ring spectacle was occurring in Italy, back in the United States, Spyros Skouras was losing his battle with irate stockholders, who held him accountable for the folly of this unbelievable runaway production. (By now the *Cleopatra* debacle had forced the studio to sell off much of its backlot to gain a desperately needed flow of fresh cash. Because of Fox's near-bankrupt status, production was nearly nonexistent. As a result, what remained of plant expenses was almost entirely thrust on *Cleopatra*, thus adding to its out-of-control costs.) Spyros and his subordinates commuted frequently to Rome to push the drained Mankiewicz to wind up the shoot on this notorious film. (At this stage of production there was already a massive twenty-six hours of "usable" *Cleopatra* footage, which Skouras wearily sat through—or slept through. It prompted the frazzled studio chieftain to tell Walter Wanger, "I wish to hell I'd never seen you in my life.")



It was not until late June 1962 that Elizabeth Taylor finished shooting in Rome on *Cleopatra*, with the production winding up the next month with location work in Egypt. (In the final weeks of filming, Mankiewicz was so exhausted and ill that he had to be carried to the film set on a stretcher.) By this time Skouras had been ousted from his post of power and pushed upstairs to become the chairman of the board. In a coup, Darryl F. Zanuck had returned to active management of the floundering Twentieth Century-Fox with his son, Richard, installed as vice president in charge of production (replacing Peter G. Levathes, Skouras's son-in-law and an interim executive in charge of Fox productions). As *Cleopatra* entered its final months of filming, Walter Wanger was unceremoniously relieved of his duties on the mammoth project he had initiated so many months ago. Desperate to retain some face within the industry and to see his long-cherished vehicle completed, he remained in Rome at his own expense as a near-powerless onlooker.

To exact revenge on his studio adversaries and earn a healthy fee, Wanger wrote—with the collaboration of journalist Joe Hyams—*My Life*

*With Cleopatra* (1963). It was Walter's subjective account of the bizarre twists and turns that occurred in making the enormous picture and how, from his point of view, the Taylor-Burton romance had overwhelmed the shoot. (The book, considered a daring behind-the-scenes look at a major studio, was followed later that year by *The Cleopatra Papers*, written by two former Twentieth Century-Fox publicity department staffers. Both tomes caused Skouras and his cohorts much public embarrassment.) Later, Wanger would sue Twentieth Century-Fox regarding his proper screen credit, producer's participation percentage, and so forth, on *Cleopatra*. (He eventually settled for \$100,000.)

In October 1962 Mankiewicz flew to Paris to screen a rough cut of *Cleopatra* for Zanuck. (By now Zanuck's own long-in-the-works vehicle, the World War II epic *The Longest Day*, was opening to a highly positive response around the world. Its profit helped Twentieth Century-Fox survive through the final *Cleopatra* expenses.) A past master at effectively (re)editing pictures, Zanuck found many faults with the overly talky, excessively lengthy version of *Cleopatra* that he previewed. He rejected the director's plea to release the epic as two separate three-hour features (*Caesar and Cleopatra* and *Antony and Cleopatra*). Zanuck reasoned that if he spaced the suggested two releases several months apart, audiences might not attend part one, which featured very little of Taylor and Burton. Besides, he worried that the (in)famous love team might have broken up by the time part two was distributed and it would kill the film(s) at the box office.

Mankiewicz proved intractable to his boss's demands to cut further large chunks out of the picture (especially scenes involving the weak-willed, alcoholic Mark Antony character, which Darryl despised—seeing too much of his real-life self in the screen figure), so Zanuck publicly fired the filmmaker and brought in Elmo William to shave down the epic and rearrange the narrative. After a few months of effort, Zanuck came to a sudden realization. Because *Cleopatra* had no intact final shooting script, only Mankiewicz was capable of stitching together the huge number of scenes into a cohesive whole. This led to a rapprochement between the two veteran talents. Under Zanuck's impatient command, the director completed the edits. In addition, in February 1963 he reconvened several crew and cast members to restage the film's opening scene (the battle of Pharsalia) in Spain, all done with Zanuck on hand to ride herd over Mankiewicz. When at last it was finished, the final cut of

*Cleopatra* had a mammoth 243-minute running time, making it 5 minutes longer than the previously longest feature film, 1939's *Gone With the Wind*.



Promoted as “The Entertainment of a Lifetime” and “The Film the Whole World Is Waiting to See,” *Cleopatra* bowed with much fanfare in New York on June 12, 1963. (At one point Skouras had a brainstorm to open the giant-size film at Manhattan’s massive Madison Square Garden.) One Hollywood wit had already quipped of the much-ballyhooed new release, “Don’t send a movie critic to review it. Send a CPA.” But the film reviewers did pass judgment, and their reactions were mixed at best, ranging from fawning praise by the *New York Times*’s Bosley Crowther to a scathing appraisal by the *New York Herald-Tribune*’s Judith Crist, who decided, “*Cleopatra* is at best a major disappointment, at worst an extravagant exercise in tedium.”

*Time* magazine opined that the much-hyped movie lacked style “both in image and in action,” adding, “Never for an instant does it whirl along on wings of epic élan; generally it just bumps from scene to ponderous scene on the square wheels of exposition.” The *New Yorker*’s scribe judged Taylor “less an actress than a great natural wonder, like Niagara or the Alps.” (Many critics found Elizabeth too contemporary a personality to properly evoke an Egyptian queen of old, and that in the film’s second half her performance became increasingly and annoyingly shrill and shrewish. *Time* magazine said, “She screeches like a ward heeler’s wife at a block party.”)

Regarding Mankiewicz’s contribution to Fox’s white whale, most reviewers assessed that he had failed to provide crowd-pleasing entertainment in the manner of Cecil B. DeMille, who had directed Paramount’s highly successful *Cleopatra* (1934) starring Claudette Colbert. John Simon of the *New Leader* noted, “Mankiewicz, as writer or director, has no genuine flair for the action-crammed historic canvas; his gift, such as it is, is for the brisk comedy, which is of small avail here, and for witty repartee, which will not be squeezed from stones like Elizabeth Taylor.” (On the other hand, many reviewers commented favorably on the picture’s cinematography, set designs, and costumes, as well as Alex North’s evocative score.)

Despite the critical pans and the disapproval of the Catholic Church's Legion of Decency, which decried the film's salacious aspects (such as a nearly nude Taylor being massaged by her handmaiden), the public flocked to *Cleopatra* to see the infamous lovebirds cavort on the big screen. After its road show—reserved-seat engagements in big cities—the picture was trimmed by twenty-two minutes for general release. Nominated for nine Oscars, *Cleopatra* won four (for cinematography, art/set direction, costumes, and special visual effects). However, it lost in the Best Picture category to the British-made *Tom Jones*. Of the main players, only Harrison was Oscar-nominated, but he lost to Sidney Poitier (the star of the low-budget *Lilies of the Field*).

Thanks to the hubbub surrounding the extended making of *Cleopatra* and the intensive, blatant campaign to promote its release, the screen saga went on to earn a massive \$26 million in theatrical rentals during its first year. This sum was not enough to cover the enormous costs of putting together the celluloid spectacle. Eventually, however, after the sale of ancillary rights (for TV showings, home video, and DVD editions) the movie made a relatively modest profit. But in the process a studio was eviscerated.

Taylor first saw a release print of *Cleopatra* at a charity screening in London. She was distraught by the emasculated story line, which deleted many of her and especially Burton's "best" scenes. Angered, she embarked on a vocal campaign of badmouthing the "vulgar" finished results. This led Twentieth Century-Fox to later file a \$50 million lawsuit against her and Burton for their lack of deportment during the filming, which had caused so many delays and huge overages. The legal tiff was eventually settled out of court. Instead of the nearly \$7 million Elizabeth might have walked away with from *Cleopatra*, she ended up with \$2.4 million.



In Hollywood you are only as good as your last picture. If *Cleopatra* nearly toppled the fast-decaying Twentieth Century-Fox, two years later the studio was back in the money with the massive success of *The Sound of Music*. In 1969 Skouras, the scapegoat for the *Cleopatra* debacle, was removed from his meaningless post as the studio's chairman of the board. He died in 1971 at age 79. In a strange twist of political intrigue and power play, in late 1970 Darryl Zanuck fired his son, Richard, from the once



again financially faltering studio. (The then-current regime had obviously learned little from the company's *Cleopatra* catastrophe, making such later costly flops as 1967's *Doctor Dolittle*, 1969's *Hello, Dolly!*, and 1970's *Tora! Tora! Tora!*) In May 1971 Zanuck Sr. was forced to resign as Fox's chief executive, retaining a meaningless emeritus board post. In 1977 he died at age 77. After the *Cleopatra* chaos, producer Walter Wanger, who once said, "Nothing is as cheap as a hit no matter how much it costs," never supervised another movie. Although he had several Hollywood screen projects in the pipeline before and during the *Cleopatra* turmoil, many in the industry—including the Fox studio—blamed him for the spectacle's runaway costs. He died of a heart attack in late 1968 at age 74.

As for Taylor and Burton, they married in 1964, divorced in 1974, rewed in 1975, and parted again the following year. During this span of domesticity they costarred in eleven features, including the stellar *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), for which Elizabeth won her second Academy Award. Burton died in 1984 at age 54. Taylor went on to marry and divorce twice more. Looking back on the *Cleopatra* (mis)adventure, Taylor would assess, "It was like a disease. An illness one had a very difficult time recuperating from." Joseph L. Mankiewicz directed only three more features in his career, the last in 1972. After the *Cleopatra* shambles, he would describe the experience as "the hardest three pictures I ever made." Of *Cleopatra* he noted wryly, "If you want a textbook on how not to make a film, this is it!" He passed away in 1993 at age 83.



Elizabeth Taylor's once seemingly supersized *Cleopatra* paycheck pales next to the \$20 million to \$30 million salaries demanded by top movie superstars in present-day Hollywood. However, Taylor holds a special place in Hollywood history for the lavish treatment she demanded and her exceptionally self-indulgent behavior, which were the pivotal forces in an originally planned modest motion picture's skyrocketing out of control creatively and financially.

As cinema historian Paul Monaco wrote in *History of the American Cinema—Volume 8: The Sixties: 1960–1969*, "*Cleopatra* was not just a movie that had spun out of control: rather, it was emblematic of the breakdown of an entire production process that historically had been well planned, systematic, and accountable."